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DEMOCRATIZATION, ETHNICITY, AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA:
THE CASE OF BURUNDI

CORE COURSE IV POLICY PAPER

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Introduction

Shortly after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the winds of democratic change began to sweep sub-Saharan Africa. While Western donors, notably France and the United States, sought to encourage the movement toward political pluralism, much of the impetus for reform came from Africa itself. In some instances, autocratic rulers were forcibly removed from power by rebellious elements demanding an alternative to one party rule. More often, however, the democratic process was initiated by the autocratic regimes that had blocked political change since shortly after independence.

Why would a political class that had the most to lose from reform unleash such an unpredictable and risk-filled¹ process? Not surprisingly, in a region as large and diverse as Africa, the motivations were many and varied. In the majority of instances, it was a case of unpopular leaders trying to stay ahead of a domestic opinion increasingly influenced by the foreign media. Some leaders were mindful that traditional foreign aid donors were likely to shift their attention to new democracies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere if Africa continued to stagnate economically and politically -- a concern intensified by occasional policy statements from donor country officials. Yet other African officials were swayed by a growing body of thought whose proponents argued that pluralism was the political form most conducive to the free market development model being pressed by

¹ Prominent among the victims of self-imposed democratic reforms were Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, who was defeated at the polls, and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, who chose to step down rather than face a disillusioned electorate.

Western donors.

The level of commitment of African leaders embracing democracy varied as widely as the motivations. While most saw some degree of democratic change as inevitable and proceeded accordingly, others were more cynical in their approach.²

In the case of the central African nation of Burundi, democratization was introduced by a visionary young leader, President Pierre Buyoya, who saw increased political participation as a means of solving the problem that had plagued his country since before independence: ethnic divisionism. By mid-1993, when the process launched by Buyoya came to fruition, Burundi was being hailed as one of the most brilliant successes of democratization in Africa. Nearly 27 years of military rule had ended in national elections, and for the first time in the nation's history, a member of the majority Hutu ethnic group was chief of state.

One hundred days later, tragedy struck. The new president was dead, murdered along with several members of his government by military officers of the minority Tutsi tribe. Recrimination and fear seized the nation. Tens of thousands of persons subsequently died at the hands of their countrymen, while hundreds of thousands fled their homes.

Can the tragic case of Burundi provide lessons for other nations embarking on the path to democracy, as well as for countries like the United States who are committed to helping them? In attempting to provide some answers, I will examine the Burundian experience, comment on the relevance of that nation to

² One writer refers to the democratic "hoaxes" perpetrated by certain leaders (Kraus, p. 209).

other African countries, and advance a number of policy recommendations for the donor community. I will take it as a given that the spread of democracy -- a recurring theme of U.S. foreign policy since Wilson -- is a fundamental national interest, whereas when democratic forms of government fail, U.S. economic, political, and human rights interests suffer.

The Case of Burundi

Ethnicity is without question the central issue in Burundi. Ethnic considerations weigh heavily on every social institution and every decision affecting the distribution of political and economic power.

One theory of ethnic relations in Burundi posits that ethnicity did not have a significant influence in the pre-colonial era. According to this theory, ethnic consciousness was "imported" by the Belgians, who administered the combined kingdom of Rwanda-Urundi as a League of Nations/United Nations Trust Territory from the end of World War I until independence in 1962. While there is little doubt that at least some degree of dominance by Tutsis over Hutus existed in the feudal, pre-colonial system, its extent is obscured by history. What is clear, however, is that colonial administrators, relying on the authority structure in place to facilitate the task of governance, perpetuated and accentuated existing differences by favoring the minority Tutsi ethnic group. This was effected mainly through educational opportunities and administrative appointments.

Like most African countries, Burundi was ill-equipped for independence when it arrived in the early 1960s. Under the royal Mwami -- a figurehead chief of state with limited governing powers -- a succession of post-independence parliamentary governments was wracked by violence and ethnic intrigue. In 1966, Michel Micombero, a Tutsi military officer from the southern province of Bururi, seized power in a bloodless coup and declared a republic in the form of a one party state. Hutus were progressively purged from what had been an ethnically integrated national army.

In 1972, following an organized uprising by Hutus in several parts of the country, a massive military-led repression of Hutus took place. In the defining moment of Burundi's history, educated Hutus down to the level of primary schoolchildren were systematically eliminated. Of a total population of 3.5 million, between 100,000 and 300,000 people were killed, and approximately 250,000 fled Burundi to seek refuge in neighboring Rwanda,³ Tanzania, and Zaire.

An uneasy but lengthy peace followed the "events of 1972." Non-violent coups d'etat broke the calm in 1976 and 1987, but only temporarily. In both instances, young military officers from the same southern commune as Micombero seized power, dealing with their predecessors by relegating them to foreign exile.

Micombero's successor, Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, began his rule with a period of reconciliation and ethnic opening. As his reign progressed, however, Bagaza became increasingly intolerant of any

³ Rwanda, which is situated immediately to the north of Burundi, contains a similar ethnic mix but has been dominated politically by Hutus since a violent purge of Tutsis just prior to independence.

group or institution that could potentially threaten his control. This was especially true of organized religion,⁴ which was seen as an outlet for Hutu aspirations. Bagaza's erratic foreign and domestic policies eventually earned the wrath of the international community and distanced him from the rest of the military establishment, which decided to move against him.

The man who succeeded Bagaza, Major Pierre Buyoya, was an unknown quantity when he came to power in September 1987. Buyoya moved quickly to reverse the policies that were undermining his country's international reputation by mending fences with Burundi's neighbors, encouraging banned churches to return, and outlawing a lucrative ivory trade. At the same time, he undertook a cautious policy of ethnic rapprochement with the majority Hutus (the ethnic breakdown of Burundi's population is approximately 85% Hutu, 14% Tutsi, and 1% Twa {pygmy}). Further, Buyoya promised that more significant reforms would follow in some unspecified form of power-sharing.

The sixteen year peace was broken in August 1988 when Hutus in Burundi's two northernmost provinces began killing Tutsi neighbors. The violence was triggered by rumors that a massacre of Hutus was imminent, possibly planted by Hutu extremists seeking the overthrow of Tutsi rule. Military units were dispatched to the area and put down the unrest with massive force. Between five and twenty thousand people were killed, and 100,000 crossed the border into Rwanda. Buyoya, who was outside the country when the killings began, returned hurriedly and ordered an immediate end to military

⁴ The Catholic Church, which enjoys a heavy following throughout Burundi, was especially hard hit by Bagaza's anti-religious policies.

violence.

To the surprise of many, Buyoya did not abandon his moderate approach. After restoring peace to the region affected by the violence, he successfully managed the return of the refugees from Rwanda by enlisting the help of the Rwandan government and international relief organizations. He appointed a Hutu prime minister and commissioned a multi-ethnic board to study the issue of national (ethnic) unity. At the foundation of Buyoya's social program was a massive public education campaign based on the theme of ethnic reconciliation.

As the debate on national unity moved forward, Buyoya became convinced that multi-party democracy represented both an end and a means of achieving ethnic reconciliation in Burundi. Rather than setting a deadline for national elections, Buyoya established a progression of steps to be taken along the way: the publication of the report of the national unity commission (May 1989), the adoption by referendum of a national unity charter (February 1991), the naming of a constitutional commission (March 1991), the adoption by referendum of a new constitution (March 1992), and the legalization of opposition parties (June 1992). The new constitution was modeled after the Fifth Republic in France -- a strong president sharing power with a government selected by the president from an elected legislature. National elections were set for June 1993 in two stages; president elections on June 1 and legislative elections on June 30.

As the campaign opened, FRODEBU (Burundi Democratization Front), an opposition party created by young urban intellectuals -

- mostly Hutus -- quickly emerged as the party of change and the chief rival to UPRONA, formerly the official party. Buyoya, who wanted desperately to become Burundi's first democratically elected president, faced a serious dilemma. Given his immense popularity as the architect of democratization and his personal reputation for standing above ethnic partisanship, should he break with UPRONA and run as an independent? This would undoubtedly maximize Buyoya's already-broad appeal to the majority Hutu electorate, which tended to view UPRONA as the party of the status quo, i.e., continued Tutsi dominance. Or should he remain with UPRONA out of loyalty to the vehicle he had used to effect democratic change and to the many party members -- Hutus and Tutsis alike -- who had tied their political fortunes to their popular leader? In the end, Buyoya chose to stand with UPRONA, a decision that may have cost him the presidency and changed the course of Burundi's history.

Melchior Ndadaye, a young Hutu banker and FRODEBU's presidential candidate, won 64% of the popular vote versus Buyoya's 32%. The electorate had apparently split along ethnic lines. Despite the baggage of UPRONA, Buyoya gained a share of the vote over twice the percentage of Tutsis in the general population. In the legislative elections, 65 seats went to FRODEBU and 16 seats to UPRONA.

Shocked by the defeat, Buyoya graciously accepted the results and urged the nation to rally behind the new leadership. Other UPRONA supporters were not as generous; two aborted coup plots by disaffected military elements were reported within days of the

elections.

Ndadaye's selection of a Tutsi prime minister was the most visible sign of the balance he attempted to bring to his administration. Other members of his government were less circumspect, however, and stepped up the ethnic rhetoric. Tutsi military officers who could not reconcile themselves to majority Hutu rule eventually prevailed. On the night of October 21, Ndadaye was seized, taken to a military camp, and killed. Other members of the government were assassinated as well, including the entire constitutional succession. A provisional civilian government was announced by the military and then rescinded in the face of strong protests from the international community and staunch domestic opposition, led by surviving members of Ndadaye's government.

The familiar pattern of retribution and counter-retribution ensued, with active participation by military units. As many as 200,000 people may have been killed, and 700,000 are estimated to have sought refuge abroad. A hurried visit by the United Nations Undersecretary General for Political Affairs prompted a call for UN intervention, which was just as quickly refused by a Security Council smarting from a disastrous military operation in Somalia. According to press report, the Security Council's decision was guided by the U.S. delegation.

Is Burundi Relevant?

Put differently, the question we need to be asking is whether

the Burundi case is sufficiently representative to serve as a model for U.S. democratization policy in Africa. Are the underlying conditions so bad there that we would be doing ourselves and other African nations a disservice by adopting an overly cautious approach?

In a number of important respects, Burundi is atypical. Because of its geographical isolation, Burundi was colonized very late in its history compared to the rest of Africa. Its people -- probably due to the mountainous geography -- are conservative, reserved, and fiercely self-reliant. Again, the contrasts with the rest of Africa are sharp. Burundi is resource-poor, even by African standards, and ranks among the lowest countries on the continent in per capita income. Similarly, Burundi and Rwanda have the highest population densities in sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps the most important difference between Burundi and the rest of Africa in its impact on political reform is the severity of past ethnic conflict and the extent to which one ethnic group has been dominant.

However, in one important respect -- a highly developed sense of nationhood -- Burundi's uniqueness makes it one of the likeliest candidates for democratization. Despite the sharp physical and psychological differences between Hutus and Tutsis, Burundi society is extremely homogeneous. The two groups live side by side throughout the country, mostly on rural hillsides. Inter-marriage is practiced, if not widespread. There exists a common culture, history, and language, as well as a sense of shared destiny. By contrast, many African scholars believe that loyalties

to groups other than the nation-state represent the greatest impediment to institutional reform throughout the continent.

I therefore will argue that Burundi is a suitable model for looking at democratic change in Africa. Because of the depth of the underlying social tensions, the reform process may have unraveled more quickly and with greater violence in Burundi than may occur elsewhere. The risk of failure, however, should not be seen as any higher in Burundi than in other parts of Africa.

The Lessons of Burundi

The policy recommendations contained below constitute a mixed bag of remedies, ranging from the passive to the active and from the practical to the quasi-utopian.

The most immediate lesson the outside world can draw from the experience of Burundi is just how limited a role it has to play after a country has begun the move toward democracy. Although influenced by outside events and encouraged by outside agents, democratization in Burundi was seen as a local response to a local problem at a pace set locally. Offers to provide technical assistance to the constitutional commission, for example, were politely but firmly refused. Constraints on the donor community can be self-imposed, as well. To cite the present example, in retrospect, the pace of reform in Burundi was incredibly -- if not dangerously -- rapid. Yet in a future scenario, what Western ambassador or capital would be bold enough to insist that a responsible African government proceeding systematically toward

national elections should slow its efforts?

That said, there is no substitute for good diplomacy in devising programs to assist the democratic process. Understanding the nature of the country in which one is working and maintaining a diverse and trusted mix of contacts are the best means of knowing when, how much, and how to exert positive influence on democratization. The United States, well aware of the ethnic/military dynamic in Burundi, sponsored an intervention appropriately tailored to local circumstances. The event in question, held as elections approached, was a regional conference in Bujumbura concerning the role of the military in a democratic society.

If there is one overriding policy lesson that the United States and other Western donors should take away from the tragedy in Burundi, it is that we should be deemphasizing the end state of democratic reforms -- national elections -- in favor of institution and confidence building at the grass roots level. In the words of one of our speakers, "An election is not enough; cultural foundations have to be there." Here again, knowledge of local conditions is essential if outside assistance is to be effective. USAID's reorganization along thematic lines, with a prominent role for democratization, is clearly a step in the right direction if the focus is on early or intermediate steps. In the general context, fostering a free and responsible press is a program with applicability almost everywhere in Africa. In the context of Burundi, there is a clear need for judicial reforms that further the concept of equality before the law. Other

countries with a history of ethnic discrimination would most likely benefit from a similar approach.

In the security area, a U.S. program often overlooked is International Military Education and Training (IMET), which can be a powerful means of instilling the values underlying democracy in future military leaders. This is not an insignificant consideration in a continent that had seen sixty-two coups d'etat by the mid-1980's.⁵

Burundi's Ambassador to the United States, a Hutu intellectual who worked at the presidency during the lead-up to elections and who was in Burundi when President Ndadaye was killed, has stated that no IMET graduates were implicated in the action against the government. Moreover, an IMET graduate was district commander in one of the rare areas that escaped violence following Ndadaye's assassination. The Ambassador attributes the calm in that area -- a focal point of conflict in previous episodes of ethnic violence -- to policies undertaken by the U.S.-trained officer. Despite his extreme bitterness over the military's actions, the Ambassador argues for "a significant exposure of the military to a sizable contingent of other military from both within and from without."⁶ Although Burundi's IMET program was rightly suspended in the wake of Ndadaye's murder, the Ambassador has expressed the hope that the program will be restored.

The implications for U.S. policy in Africa are obvious.

⁵ Griffiths, p. 66.

⁶ Bacamurwanko, p. 8.

Unfortunately, this year's worldwide IMET budget request was cut by half in the Congress, apparently as the result of a procedural quirk. Restoring and increasing the Administration's request in future exercises should be a top priority.

Morton Halperin, in an article in *Foreign Policy*, argues that "when a people attempts to hold free elections and establish a constitutional democracy, the United States and the international community should not only assist but should 'guarantee' the result."⁷ In the African context, Halperin has it half right. For maximum effectiveness, it is imperative that any such guarantee originate with the United Nations, not individual members. The UN was "present at the creation" of African independence and still enjoys significant credibility and emotional appeal across the continent. As it is unlikely that anything stronger than some sort of non-binding or moral guarantee would be institutionalized by the international community (Halperin's article, written before the Somali debacle, implies that the ultimate guarantee should be force⁸), the moral suasion that the United Nations can best provide may prove decisive in some future context. However, even establishing a non-enforceable guarantee may prove to be unrealistic in the present environment. It took the United States two years and much arm-twisting to get the UN General Assembly to approve a resolution offering electoral assistance and certification to those countries that request it.

Would the existence of a democratization pact with the United

⁷ Halperin, p. 105.

⁸ Halperin, p. 119-20.

Nations last October -- duly endorsed by every sector of Burundian society -- have dissuaded a group of military officers from taking the law into their own hands? It is not inconceivable. We owe it to the Burundis of the world and to ourselves as the ultimate proponent of democracy to work toward such a mechanism.

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